

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chayai Sarah, November 2014

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Chayai Sarah – putting other people's interests first

In this week's Parsha of Chayai Sarah, we read of Eliezer's journey to Aram Naharaim to find a wife for Yitzchak from Avraham's family. Eliezer asks Hashem for a sign so that he will know when he has found the perfect marriage partner for Yitzchak. As soon as he finishes his request Rivkah appears. Rivkah gives Eliezer a drink and then offers to water his camels. Eliezer's request for a sign has been answered.

This portion is unusually long. The entire narrative and the dialogue with Rivkah is included twice – once as it happens and again when Eliezer relates the whole story to Rivkah's family. The Torah is generally very economical with its words. Every word and every letter has significance. Why does the Torah essentially repeat this story, thereby significantly lengthening this Parsha? Let's explore one possible reason.

The musical notes that dictate the tune used to recite the Torah portion is called "trope". Above the word 'Vayomer' (Breishit 24:12) there is an unusual trope called "shalsholet". The baal koreh is required to sing the word 'Vayomer' up and down a number of times, as if he is stuck and cannot move to the next word. The shalsholet only appears 4 times in the Torah. Each time that the shalsholet appears coincides with a character that engages in an inner struggle or faces a big decision and is momentarily stuck and vacillates over what to do. The sound of the shalsholet can be seen as a reflection of this hesitation.

In our Parsha, the shalsholet appears just before Eliezer prays to Hashem, asking for a sign so that he will know that he is successful in his task of finding a wife for Yitzchak. The other three times that a shalsholet appears in the Torah are:

- In last week's Parsha of Vayera (Breishit 19:16) when Lot was leaving Sodom before it was destroyed. Rashi explains that Lot hesitated to leave because he wanted to save his possessions.
- In Parshat Vayeshev (Breishit 39:8) when Yosef hesitated when deciding how to respond to the overtures of Potiphar's wife.
- In Parshat Tzav (Vayikra 8:23) when Moshe inaugurated Aharon as the Cohen Gadol. Perhaps Moshe hesitated because Aharon was involved in the sin of the Golden Calf and he was not certain that Aharon was appropriate for the position¹.

We see that each of these three appearances of the shalsholet coincides with a character that is hesitating. But what about Eliezer? What was he hesitating about? The midrash reveals that Eliezer wanted his own daughter to marry Yitzchak. Being in charge of finding a wife for Yitzchak was thus surely a difficult task for him to carry out. Eliezer could have put his own self interest first and deliberately failed in his mission so that his daughter could

¹ This idea was suggested to me by Rabbi Yirmi Garfunkel.

potentially marry Yitzchak herself. Eliezer is momentarily stuck in indecision (hence the shalsholet). Does he put his own self-interest first, or does he complete his task as Avraham's loyal and faithful servant? Ultimately, he manages to overcome his self-interest, consequently securing the continuation of the Jewish people.

Perhaps the extra long portion represents Eliezer's reward for his self-sacrifice. We see other cases where individuals or groups who have acted in a meritorious manner are rewarded by having an extra portion added to the Torah in their merit. Eliezer joins a rare group of people who have such a merit. This group includes Yitro (see Rashi to Shmot 18:1), the daughters of Tzlophchad (see Rashi to Bamidbar 27:5) and the people involved in the story of Pesach sheni (see Rashi to Bamidbar 9:7). It may be difficult for us to imagine the true blessing to someone of having an extra portion written in the Torah in their merit.

In contrast, we also see the opposite phenomenon in this week's Parsha. We see that Hashem also leaves out letters from the Torah as a consequence of someone acting in a selfish manner. The Parsha begins with the death of Sarah. Avraham wishes to bury Sarah in Efron's cave. Efron makes grand claims, suggesting that he wishes to give the cave to Avraham as a gift. However his real intention is to sell it for an exorbitant price. Efron is motivated by selfishness. As a punishment, Efron's name (which is usually spelt with the letter 'Vav') is written once without the letter 'Vav' (see Breishit 23:16 and Rashi's commentary).

What does it mean to have a letter missing from your name recorded for eternity in the Torah? From our limited perspective in the physical world we cannot perceive the ramifications. Perhaps it is comparable to missing a limb in this world? Similarly, we also can't even begin to imagine the pleasure one would receive for being responsible for adding a whole portion to the Torah.

Note that Hashem punished Efron by omitting a single letter from Efron's name. In contrast, Eliezer's reward was a lengthy portion in the Torah. This reflects Hashem's mercy. We see how much greater is Hashem's reward over his punishment. We should keep in mind how much reward there is waiting for us if we can put someone's needs ahead of our own and act in a selfless manner. Like Eliezer, we may not see the reward or its size in this world, but it will be waiting for us in the world to come. It's worth it.

Let's try something this week:

Notice a situation where there is a tension between our selfish needs and helping someone else. When we next face this test, try to remember the enormous self-sacrifice that Eliezer made and the reward that he received. Try to emulate Eliezer's selfless behaviour.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parsha relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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